Two Theorists of Perfection: **Plato** (Athenian; 428-348 B.C.) and **Mill** (British; 1806-1873)

Introduction

Perfectionism

- The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines "perfectionism" as:

  a moral theory according to which *certain states or activities of human beings, such as* ***knowledge****,* ***achievement****, and* ***artistic creation***, are good apart from any pleasure or happiness they bring, and what is morally right is what most promotes these human "excellences" or "perfections."

Perfectionism

- These “excellences” could be **external** ones. For example:
  1. national glory and power
  2. great artistic and military achievements
- See, e.g., Nietzsche’s essay “The Greek State.”
- For both Plato and Mill, however, the focus is on **internal** excellences, i.e., *the development of the **capacities/powers** of individual citizens, esp. **cognitive** powers, and choice of political institutions that best promote this end.*

Plato vs. Mill

- Beyond these broad similarities, though, important differences emerge between them. We will explore these over the course of the quarter, but I offer an overview at this stage; ***refer to it occasionally as you read their works.***
- I focus here on **four** key, interrelated differences:
  1. Types of Perfectionism: **Narrow vs. Broad**
  2. Metaphysical Commitments: **Strong vs. Nonexistent**
  3. Cognitive Development: **Theoretical vs. Practical**
  4. Elitist Politics: **Authoritarian vs. Liberal-Democratic**

Types of Perfectionism

1. Plato: *narrow* conception(s) of the good citizen
   a. good citizen defined by station/class; **hierarchy**
   b. best, most important citizen the (mature) philosopher king
   c. excellence achieved through rigid, competitive educational system (*paideia*); tracking into class structure
2. Mill: *broad* conception(s) of the good citizen
   a. individuals creating and pursuing character ideals by way of their own “plans of life”; (personal) **autonomy**
   b. experimentation and diversity/pluralism the result
   c. development of human powers along many dimensions: *intellectual, moral, active* (Bentham)
   d. however, cognitive powers prioritized: Mill’s peculiar (and heterodox) *qualitative hedonism*

Metaphysical Commitments

1. Plato: *strong*
   a. his metaphysics developed via metaphors: *The Sun, The Divided Line,* and *The Cave* (*Republic* VI/VII)
   b. based on the Good and the Forms (*eidē*), knowledge of which can be achieved by dialectical-thought (*noēsis*), a kind of "second sight" or intuition.
2. Mill: *nonexistent*
   a. a stalwart empiricist, like all the great utilitarians, from Epicurus to Bentham to Peter Singer
   b. he rejects metaphysics, believing in nothing beyond the physical/natural world

Cognitive Development

1. Plato: *theoretical*
   a. as just noted, a particular kind of cognitive development is particularly prized, viz. the epistemic power of *noēsis*
   b. it allows us to discern the Forms of the good city (*kallipolis*: "beautiful city") and the good citizen and hopefully better approach them in practice via political science and *paideia*
2. Mill: *practical*
   a. though prioritizing cognitive development like Plato, he has a much broader understanding of the *variety* of powers that must be developed to pursue a plurality of ends
   b. he is also much more focused on what (following Bentham) he calls "active" powers, i.e., practical powers of decision, resolution, and action

Elitist Politics

1. Plato: *authoritarian*
   a. given his narrow, metaphysical, and theoretically-inflected perfectionism, it is perhaps unsurprising that Plato's politics is not only elitist but authoritarian
   b. a class of philosopher kings has access to the Good and the Forms, knowledge of which entitles them to rule unilaterally
2. Mill: *liberal-democratic*
   a. his rejection of metaphysics, combined with a broader, more practice-oriented understanding of individual improvement, leads him in a very different direction
   b. The contours of a Millian politics:
      i. **Individual freedom (liberalism):** especially freedoms of speech, press, and assembly; many different "centers" of improvement
      ii. **Representative government (democracy):** participatory politics; provides a political education to all and encourages progress
      iii. **But retention of elitist assumptions:** leadership; plural voting; etc.

Course Website

- All PowerPoint presentations are posted on the course's Canvas website (under "Files").
- You can also find a copy of the syllabus there as well as a link to my departmental webpage, which has my e-mail address and relevant links on it.
- Be sure to check the website frequently, as I will sometimes post announcements, links, and documents on it.

Reading Political Theory Texts

- Read it *twice* (or more often).
- Read it *carefully:* it's not fiction, history, etc.
- *Outline* the arguments presented.
- *Marginalia:* add comments, cross-refs, etc.; your texts are not sacred—write on them.
- Come to class/section with *questions* about the texts—if you don't have any, you haven't read and thought about them carefully enough.
- **ALSO: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy***